DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 451 516 CS 217 478

AUTHOR	Sloan, Glenna
TITLE	In Bringing Children and Poetry Together, Teaching Matters.
PUB DATE	2000-11-00
NOTE	14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (90th, Milwaukee, WI, November 16-21, 2000).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Education; *Expressive Language; Graduate Study; Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; *Poetry
IDENTIFIERS	City University of New York Queens College; *Poetry in the Schools; *Response to Literature

ABSTRACT

Poetry provides language that is most likely to amaze, astonish, and delight reader and hearer. And children, before school spoils it for them, seem to have a natural affinity for poetry and verse. This paper discusses the ways in which children respond to poetry. The paper notes that relatively little research has been done to determine how significant and long-term study of poetry and verse might both "affect" and "effect" literacy development, probably because few educators take poetry seriously enough to study its effect on reading and writing. It finds that there are, however, proofs of the power of poetry in a literary education, and provides some examples. The paper then describes a graduate course, "Poetry for Children," given at Queens College. It presents examples of what some of the course's students have to tell about using poetry in their elementary school classes. (Contains 11 references.) (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 451 516

In Bringing Children and Poetry Together, Teaching Matters.

by Glenna Sloan

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
G. Sloan
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

CS 217 478

IN BRINGING CHILDREN AND POETRY TOGETHER, TEACHING MATTERS

Glenna Sloan

Literacy begins in hearts, not heads. For some, it may begin in the moment of silent awe that follows the reading of a poem like "The Ballad if the Harp-Weaver" by Edna St. Vincent Millay. For others, it could begin with laughter at the mishaps of Pooh and Piglet or with tears at Charlotte's death. For little ones, chanting the refrain from Wanda Gag's *Millions of Cats* might be all it takes to spark a lifetime fascination with words. There is a story or poem to raise a goose bump on the toughest skin and we are well advised to help each child find it. A child who has never thrilled to words will remain indifferent to reading and writing them.

Few would disagree that it is in poetry that we will most often find language likely to amaze, astonish, and delight reader and hearer. It is in literature, poetry in particular, that we experience language as art.. And children, before school spoils it for them, seem to have a natural affinity for poetry and verse. In their remarkable book about children's oral lore , Peter and Iona Opie (1959) quote Dylan Thomas, who observed that the children "tumble and rhyme" out of the school door.

They come chanting: *Oh my finger, oh my thumb, oh my belly, oh my bum*, or a similar nonsensical rhyme. They taunt: *Tell tale tit, Your tongue shall be slit.* They jump rope to rhythmic rhymes. They talk silly: *Red, white and blue/My mother is a Jew/My father is a Scotsman/And I'm a kangaroo.* They delight in silly riddles, conundrums, and nonsensical inquiries that pun and play with words: *When is a sailor not a sailor? When he's aboard. Can the orange box? No, but the tomato can.* They use rhyme to help them remember: *Thirty days*

hath September, April, June, and November and so on.

Anyone who knows young children knows that they delight in this lore and more: jingles, slogans, macabre and disgusting rhymes, nonsense verses, tongue-twisters. *Trick or treat, smell my feet. See you later, alligator; In a while, crocodile.*

They have been known, as did this four-year-old in a conversation with a bug, to converse in rhyme: *Bug, wug, buggy, wuggy, bug, wug. Glug.* A seven-year old helping to carve a pumpkin had this to say: *This stuff inside is orange gunk. It's orange gook, It's orange glook It's orange gloopy goo.* Children spontaneously use poetic devices without knowing that they do. They alliterate: *You're a funny fat fink.* They employ onomatopoeia: *Tommy was riding--swish; hits a rock--smack; falls in a puddle-KSSHH.* Given the chance, they create rhymed couplets with no problem, as did these first graders in a Bronx school: There goes a rat/Wearing a silly hat (Andy); My friend the bug/Gave me a hug (William); Mario likes to run/Run in the sun (Mario); The jeep fell on the sheep (Tanya).

As the eminent critic, Northrop Frye said it: "The speech of a small child is full of chanting and singing, and it is clear that the child understands what many adults do not, that verse is a more direct and primitive way of conventionalizing speech than prose is" (1970, p. 96). Frye goes on to say:: "The greatest fallacy in the present conception of literary education is the notion that prose is the normal language of ordinary speech, and should form the center and staple of literary teaching...The root of the fallacy is the assumption that prose represents the only valid form of thought, and that poetry, considered as thought, is essentially decorated or distorted prose. [This would explain our deplorable custom of ransacking a poem to uncover its *true* meaning; in other words, its *prose* translation.]...The main principles of a coherently organized curriculum are

simple enough [says Frye]....Poetry should be at the center of all literary training, and literary prose forms the periphery " (p. 94). We know, of course, that in the world of the classroom just the opposite is true: *poetry* is at the periphery of the curriculum, if it is in sight at all.

Relatively little research has been done to determine how significant and long-term study of poetry and verse might both *affect* and *effect* literacy development I believe that the reason for the dearth of research is clear enough. Few educators take poetry seriously enough to study its effect on reading and writing. It plays only a minor role in classroom life, occasionally used as reading material or as a read-aloud by the teacher, but not on a regular basis or in a systematic way. Indeed, few Americans take poetry seriously, or even lightly, for that matter. They simply don't care about it. The American poet and critic, Randall Jarrell, in his wise and witty autobiographical fable, *The Bat-Poet* (1964), laments the lack of an audience for poetry: "The trouble isn't making poems, the trouble's finding somebody that will listen to them" (p.15). In an essay he wrote in 1962, he echoes the Bat-Poet's words: "Isn't writing verse a dying art, anyway, like blacksmithing and buggymaking? Well, not exactly: poets are making as many buggies as ever--good buggies, fine buggies--they just can't get anybody much to ride in them" (Jarrell, 1962, 93).

Although they are not controlled studies in the scientific way or even ethnographic descriptions in the social scientific way, there *are* proofs of the power of poetry in a literary education. Ralph Tyler (1977) describes some in an article in *Bookviews.* Dylan Thomas's father, a grammar school teacher, read Thomas Shakespeare and only Shakespeare from the time he was a toddler. Those familiar with the sonorous cadences of Thomas's poetry are not surprised to hear this. Brendan Gill, for many years a writer of distinguished prose for *The New Yorker*, was

paid a dollar a line by his father to memorize verse. Even a sonnet would net good pay in the 1920's. But the payoff was even greater in the seemingly effortless style that undoubtedly came to Gill from the store of poetic cadences he held in his head.

The prolific children's poet and playwright, Eve Merriam, grew up near Philadelphia. As a child, she attended many D'Oyley Carte productions of Gilbert and Sullivan works. Those who enjoy the polysyllabic playfulness of the rhymes in Gilbert and Sullivan operas will hear their echoes in Eve Merriam's poetry. She was also influenced by the tumbling word clusters of Gerard Manley Hopkins and the originality of imagery she found in W H. Auden's work. . Myra Cohn Livingston, who left us such a rich legacy of her writing, speaks of inspiration from childhood reading. She mentions hearing Christina Rossetti's poems, one in a small book bound in green that asked the question, "Who has seen the wind?" The poetry of her childhood haunted her, held her in thrall; the love of words it engendered compelled her to write poetry herself (Children's Book Council, 1997, 31-33).

Poetry, however, comes to the classroom weighed down with so much baggage that it often can't move out from behind it. I know this because my students--all teachers--tell me so .and have been telling me so for 20 years. At Queens College, I teach a graduate class called *Poetry for Children*. My students are teachers working on their Master's, with a specialization in children's literature. Many of these teachers associate poetry with fear and loathing. In high school, they tell me, they were made to feel dumb because they couldn't find in many poems the meanings teachers said were buried there. They were made to memorize the names of poetic devices and to rummage around in poems to find examples of them . But they are teachers and therefore conscientious and believe that they are short-changing their students by not knowing

how to teach them poetry. So they enroll in Poetry for Children.

In class, we model what I hope will happen in the elementary classroom. The teachers spend most of their time in class sharing aloud with partners or in small groups the poems they have found each week that they discover they love and can't do without. Laughter rings out; sometimes a tear is wiped away. Because they are introduced to dozens of fine children's poets, the teachers learn that Shel Silverstein was not alone in making poems for children. He's good, no one denies it, but he does have colleagues, even rivals! After extensive library research, each student selects and organizes poems, then designs for them a personal anthology to have the poems they use again and again at their fingertips. These anthologies are typically works of great beauty and literary value. Many students hate to relinquish them to me for evaluation.

The teachers support each other in their writing of poems, working in small groups, trying out the forms that we identify by looking hard at the poems we share. Just as it will do with the children, reveling in poetry with delight in mind is sure to create interest in all the marvelous things that words can be made to do. The teachers learn that poetry is not an arcane, mysterious form understandable only by learned literature professors. They discover its gamelike, puzzlelike qualities as they create their own poems. They examine construction. Lots of poems are built of rhymed couplets, for instance, that are extended into quatrains. Some poems operate with question and answer. Some are all questions. They delight in finding out that there are other forms than haiku and cinquain, the perennial favorites of writers of language arts workbooks.

Because we've learned over the years that the children will prefer a rum-tum-tum beat over the subtler swoops of free verse, we concentrate on rhyme and definite rhythms. And we only study poetic devices after plenty of experiencing. Also, contrary to the practice of many

poets in the schools, we don't emphasize the point, valid though it may be, that poetry is the expression of your deep feelings. My teacher-researchers have found that this effectively silences many children. Besides, many poems, such as nonsense verse and story poems, are *not* expressions of deep feelings.

I require a study--dare I call it research? Each teacher must assess her class to find out what they know of poetry and their attitude toward it. Usually, the children know very little about poetry unless they have experienced it with a parent or a rare teacher. Sadly, many -- especially older students--have developed a negative attitude toward it. Here are some comments from third and fifth graders: "It's babyish stuff." "Some of it doesn't even rhyme." "You have to figure out what it means." "I hate it because I had to memorize a lot of it once."

The teachers create an informal survey for their classes. This may be done orally or in writing. The object is to gauge the children's knowledge and attitudes concerning poetry. Here are some sample questions from a survey of third graders: What is a poem? Do you know any poets? Do you like poetry? Why? What types of poetry do you know? My favorite poem is_____.

Based on their findings from the informal survey, the teacher designs a "treatment" especially for that group of children. The object of the treatment is to change attitudes for the better and provide knowledge to wipe out ignorance about poetry. The buzz words that guide the teachers as they plan these treatments are: "delight," immersion," "enjoyment," "inundation." Over many years of teaching this class and assigning this exercise, we have discovered, *without exception*, that a concerted effort to use poetry in the elementary classroom, without abusing it in any way, even over a short time, has significant results in knowledge and changed attitudes. By

abuse I mean, among other horrors, forced memorization, verse vivesection, trying to translate the "true" meaning of the poem into prose, learning the names of poetic devices and techniques and rummaging around in poems to find and list them

In her kindergarten, Aileen Klinger used nursery rhymes, jump rope chants, finger plays, and advertising jingles to introduce her poetry unit. When she asked her children what a poem was, no one could answer. But when she asked who had a favorite nursery rhyme, every hand shot up. "They didn't know what they knew," said Aileen. "I made a list of their responses and explained that these verses are poems."

First grade teacher Kalie Stern worked with her children, all ESL students, to find a positive descriptive word beginning with the same letter as their first name. Together they came up with Funny Frank, Smart Stanley, Artistic Adriana, Popular Paul, and Lively Levon. Then they worked to create tongue twisters according to a pattern in one of their favorites. Here is Levon's:

Lively Levon licked the lucky ladybug's leg.

Did Livley Levon lick the lucky ladybug's leg?

If Lively Levon licked the lucky ladybug's leg,

Where is the lucky ladybug's leg that Levon licked?

"Poetic language comes naturally to children," Kalie comments. "They use poetic devices like rhythm and alliteration in their daily speech. I tried to use this fact to begin more formal work with poetry. We experimented with onomatopoeia, sharing poems containing examples. After reading Taro Yashima's *Umbrella* (1970), where the sounds the rain makes are described, the children offered their own sounds for the rain. I wrote them on a chart arranged like a poem-- with short lines and lots of white space-- and we read them again and again:

Pit pat pitpit pat pit pit

Click clack click clack clack

Sh sh sh sh sh

Tap tap tap taptaptap tap

P p p p p p pp p

A second grade teacher concentrated with her children on rhymed couplets and quatrains, because she and they found the form so prevalent in children's poetry. As a group, they created "Learning": Books, pencils, and sometimes a pen;/We try to add up to more than ten./Blackboards, chalk, and 20 chairs,/ Having a teacher who really cares. Studying, gaining lots of knowledge,/ That's how we'll get into college."

Third grade teacher Joan Popper tells of beginning poetry-writing workshop with terse verse, the two-word rhymes that photographer Bruce McMillan (1990) delights in. First, she unveiled her own terse verses, printed on chart paper, with pictures. "They were hysterical over my drawings and sayings, "she says." I'd done things like Tall Paul, Whale Tale, and Creature Feature, with a picture of a three-headed monster like you'd see in a horror movie. When it was their turn, they were absorbed in their work, trying to outdo me, maybe. Sometimes, to get a rhyme, they'd put down anything, not making any sense. When that happened, I'd say, 'How would you draw that?' and they'd get back on track." Joan had flooded her classroom with collections of poetry; it took her three trips to bring the books into school. "The poetry books in my classroom never get a rest," she says. "Every night children borrow them to take home. The books are always being read during sustained silent reading, probably because they aren't assigned

and there are no assignments attached to reading them. The children constantly read poems to each other as reading partners.."

Working with sixth grade, Regina Furnari encountered negative attitudes toward poetry. Many of her students said they hated poetry as she began her study. But she introduced the children to story poems, humorous poems, poems put together like puzzles. "During the eight-week unit, my class explored poetry in many ways," she writes."They simply read poems by well-known poets silently and aloud to each other. Even shy students began to find poems to share in class. They wrote poems of their own and learned the important lesson that writing is a process. Even the best of poets don't sit down , write some words, and publish them; they have to work at it, revising, and finding the right words. They discovered that there are lots of poems out there that they can like. At the end, fifteen out of twenty-two students said they enjoyed the unit and had learned a lot. When we started the study, eighteen out of twenty-two said they disliked poetry."

Regina had particularly good luck creating cinquain with her class, but not the lame version found in language arts workbooks that often results in dreadful wooden writing. She advocated composing the real thing, using children's poet David McCord's instructions for creating cinquain (1970). "This is/ the form of the/ Cinquain. The five lines have/ 2,4,6,8,2 syllables/As here (p.93).

Alyssa Mailman's first grade fell in love with a form called vocal jazz (Barton, 1986) that can be performed. Here is their composition:

ALL: Talk, Talk, Talk

SOLOS*

1. Russian

2. Spanish

3. Indian

4.Guyanese

5. Korean

6. Chinese

7. Roumanian

ALL: English!

(Speak the following six times together)

BOYS: Chit chat. Chit chat...

GIRLS: With your hands, With your hands**

GROUPS

1. Scream!

2. Murmur

3. Yell!

4. Whisper

ALL

Stop!

[*Representative of all the languages spoken in the class.

**The children had been studying sign language]

A few weeks of work with poetry is not long enough of course to show dramatic

improvements in reading and writing skills. However, it is enough time to indicate potential for improvement. There is no potential for improvement without interest. Interest motivates. Every teacher's careful work with poetry develops that interest in the children. I know. I've been looking at the evidence for years.

Northrop Frye believed that experiencing the rhythms of verse, which reflect the child's own bodily rhythms, in a sense teaches the child the basics of using language. He considered it significant that the first selections "read" by a child--long before he or she goes to school--are likely to be the jingles of television commercials. He wondered why--in elementary school--we don't capitalize on this and use these familiar jingles as early reading material. When we are steeped in the rhythmic language of nursery rhymes and other poetry and verse, language that reflects our bodily rhythms, he believed we were more likely " to develop a speaking and prose style that comes out of the depths of personality and is a genuine expression of it" (1963, 26).

It's worth a try.

REFERENCES

Barton, Bob. (1986). *Tell Me Another.* Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.

Children's Book Council. (1997). *Book Remembered: Nurturing the Budding Writer.* New York: Children's Book Council.

Frye, Northrop. (1970). *The Stubborn Structure.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Frye, Northrop. (1963). *The Well-Tempered Critic.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Jarrell, Randall.(1964). *The Bat-Poet.* New York: Macmillan.

Jarrell, Randall. (1962). *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket: Essays and Fables.* New York:

Atheneum.

McCord, David. (1970). *For Me to Say.* Boston: Little, Brown.

McMillan, Bruce. (1990). *One Sun: A Book of Terse Verse.* New York: Holiday House.

Opie, Peter and Iona. (1959). *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren.*London: Oxford University Press.

Tyler, Ralph. (1977). "Reading Aloud-Is it Time for a Revival?" *Bookviews.*September, Pp. 16-20.

Yoshima, Taro. (1977). *Umbrella.* New York: Puffin.